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PRIVATE PROPERTY AND PERSONAL LIBERTY IN THE SOCIALIST STATE.

BY JOHN SPARGO.

I.

THE most persistent and wide-spread antagonism toward Socialism springs from a belief that, under a Socialist régime, private property in all its forms would be destroyed and personal liberty made impossible by the rule of an immense bureaucratic government. All other objections, it may be said without denying their force, are subordinate to these two.

The modern Socialist, whether dogmatic Marxist or neo-Marxist, indignantly denies both charges contained in this criticism. The greater its persistence, the greater his vehemence. Not unreasonably, he claims the right to define the Socialist ideal in which he believes and to interpret it in his own way: he refuses to accept the *dicta* of the enemies of Socialism as to its meaning. But, in spite of indignant denials, the criticism prevails.

For the almost universal prevalence of this criticism there must be some other reason than malice on the part of the critics. Underlying the seeming malevolence there is always a very real belief in the disaster to the institutions of private property and personal liberty which must attend the triumph of Socialism. Instead of hatred creating the belief that a Socialist régime is incompatible with personal freedom and with private property, the belief, deep-seated and sincere, however mistaken it may prove to be, creates the hatred. It must be remembered, also, that the belief is not confined to the malevolent opponents of Socialism and Socialist aims. Many who are very sympathetic toward the movement and the ideal, a great army of the "almost persuaded," are held back from giving their adherence to the movement through fear that the criticism is well founded.

The existence of such a widely prevalent belief must be the result of causes inherent either in the principles of Socialism or in the history of the movements based upon those principles. It is, therefore, only just that the Socialist, when he makes his sweeping denial that Socialism involves the suppression of private property and personal liberty, should be asked to explain the persistence of the fear he declares to be groundless—and this only as a prelude to an equally just demand for a reasoned statement of his own faith, so different to the unfaith of the world.

The frank and sincere Socialist will be slow to attribute the criticism to malice. He will, on the contrary, be disposed to admit that it is a perfectly natural result of certain phases of the evolution of Socialism and the development of its propaganda. He will admit, with entire good faith, that Socialists have given their opponents ample warrant for believing that with the coming of Socialism private property and personal liberty must cease. No small part of the work of the Socialists of to-day consists in undoing the work of an older generation of Socialists.

Proudhon's famous dictum, "Property is robbery," and its counterpart, "Property-holders are thieves," have been so many times reiterated by Socialists, and so often inscribed upon their banners, that no sort of blame attaches to those persons who, taking the words at their face-value in the currency of human speech, have concluded that Socialism must abolish all kinds of private property. Phrases like "the socialization of property" abound in the literature of Socialism, and in more than a few Socialist programmes, issued in this country and elsewhere, Socialism is objectively defined as "the social ownership and control of all the means of production, distribution and exchange." The definition certainly justifies the belief that the existence of a Socialist state depends upon the abolition of private property.

II.

Taking the definition literally, it is evident that under Socialism nothing which could be used as a means of producing or distributing wealth could be privately owned. No man could own a spade, a hammer or even a jack-knife, for these are all instruments of production. No woman could own a sewing-machine, or even a needle, for these are tools, means of production. No man could own a wheelbarrow, no woman could own a market-basket,

these being "means of distribution." The differences between a spade and a steam-plough, between a market-basket and a delivery van, are differences in the degree of their efficiency merely.

Now, it is quite evident that, if we are to accept this definition literally and to regard "the social ownership and control of *all* the means of production, distribution and exchange" as a *sine qua non* of Socialism, we must accept the verdict that it would destroy the institutions of personal property and liberty. The amount of property which would not come within the scope of the classification, "all means of production, distribution and exchange," is almost a negligible quantity, and it is certain that such a vast bureaucratic system of government would be needed as would practically extinguish personal liberty. It requires little imagination to see how intolerable the despotism would be if needles, spades, sewing-machines and market-baskets were to be under the control of governmental bureaus.

But, when challenged upon this important matter, the modern Socialist denies that the social ownership and control of *all* the agencies of production and distribution is a *sine qua non* of Socialism. He denies that his aim is anything of the kind. Socialism, he says, implies the social ownership and control only of certain kinds of property, certain very definite categories of productive and distributive agencies. Under Socialism, as he conceives it, private property would coexist with social property. Indeed, his claim is that Socialism, in very important respects, would extend both private property and personal liberty.

Therefore, the question arises: What things, under Socialism, will it be necessary to socialize and what to leave in the hands of private owners?

The reply to this question may take either of two forms: either we may attempt to catalogue the things which would have to be socialized in order to realize Socialism—a stupendous task—or we may attempt to state the principle of differentiation in a manner permitting its ready application to any form of property, at any time, and in any place. This latter is, indeed, the only practical method of dealing with the question. Not only is the former method a cumbersome one, involving the gigantic task of making an inventory of all kinds of property, but endless revision of the list would be necessary to make it conform to changing conditions and to the needs of particular localities.

III.

Preliminary to the attempt to state the principles of differentiation, however, a brief discussion of the nature of property seems to be necessary. If we ask ourselves, What is Property? and, instead of repeating Proudhon's classic epigrammatic reply, attempt to answer the question with the seriousness it demands, we shall soon discover that much of what we have regarded as a concrete entity is, in fact, a mere abstraction: that property is not a tangible thing, in a vast number of instances, but an assumed relation. We shall discover, too, that there are no absolute property rights anywhere.

While it is true that the recognition of private property marks the emergence of mankind from savagery, and that civilization is commonly said to rest upon that recognition, the paradox is nevertheless true that civilization and private property, in an absolute sense, are incompatible. The jurisprudence of all civilized countries rests upon the repudiation of absolute property rights of any kind whatever. Taxation is, of course, a familiar example of the collective disregard of private property rights. All kinds of property have been subjected to taxation, the collective authority exercising the right to take any part of any man's property, or even the whole of it. Henry George's proposal to impose a tax upon land values equal to the sum total of such values is a perfectly logical extension of the principle of taxation. A few years ago, the city council of Copenhagen, Denmark, applied the method to the street railways of that city with entire success, so that the owning companies were glad to surrender the lites.

The powers of domain and ultimate ownership which underlie the jurisprudence of every civilized nation prove conclusively that there is no allodial property in land, nor any form of absolute private property. A state or municipality desires land which is the "property" of one of its citizens for some public purpose, such as building a hospital or a bridge, making a park or a roadway. The "owner" of the land does not agree to sell it, whereupon the state or the municipality takes the land from him—often at its own valuation! Even when the land is needed by a quasi-private corporation, such as a railway company, the collective power is used to take away the ownership of the land from one citizen and transfer it to others.

It is very commonly assumed that this power of ultimate

ownership resting in society, through its government, applies only to land; but, in fact, no form of property is exempt from it. Not only may all forms of property be taxed, but likewise all forms of property may be sequestered. The power exercised in times of martial law, of seizing food and other supplies, is an example of this. Under the police powers of all civilized communities, in case of serious accident or disaster, the home of any person, and anything it contains, may be lawfully seized and used. Suppose that, during the San Francisco earthquake and fire, the "owner" of a supply of food or drugs, or any other vital necessity, should have clung to them, asserting his "ownership," does any sane person believe that he would have been permitted to enforce his sacred "rights" against the need of the community? Nothing, not even one's pocket handkerchief, can be said to be exempt from this ultimate power of society. If, therefore, one's handkerchief is not taken away from him, it is simply because the community does not desire to take it. In the last analysis, private property is an abstraction. It consists of nothing more than a relation between the community and the citizen, and rests upon nothing more tangible than community good-will.

Furthermore, in the development of capitalist society the *substance* of private property tends to disappear, quite irrespective of the enforcement of the ultimate powers of ownership by society. Prior to the formation of joint-stock companies, in the era of individual capitals, the investor who invested his money in a ship or a factory could say that the ship or the factory belonged to him. But with the coming of the joint-stock company and the development of the great industrial corporations, that could not be said. Suppose X to be a shareholder in a corporation which owns a cotton-mill. There are a thousand shareholders owning between them the ten thousand shares of stock of the corporation. X owns ten shares. But he does not own a one-thousandth part of the physical properties of the cotton-mill in any real sense. He could not, for instance, go into the mill and say: "Here are a thousand looms: one belongs to me. I will take it away."

What X really owns is a one-thousandth part of every brick in the building, not a single whole brick; a one-thousandth part of each cog in every machine, but not a single whole wheel; a one-thousandth part of every yard of cotton, but not a single yard of actual cotton. X could not realize his own property, separate

it from that of the other nine-hundred and ninety-nine shareholders and do as he pleased with it. To get at his one-thousandth part of a brick, he must destroy the whole brick. To actually realize his own property as a physical entity, he must destroy it and the property of his fellows. And then, paradoxically (for the whole capitalist system is a paradox), he does not realize it at all. When he has destroyed the brick and extracted his one-thousandth part of it, he does not own a one-thousandth part of a brick, but only some fragments of burned clay.

However we look at it, private property under our present social system is an abstraction. The property of the citizen in the immense assets of the State of New York, or of the United States, is just as real as the property of the shareholder in the United States Steel Corporation. But there is this important difference, that the citizen's share is not negotiable; it may not be transferred. It cannot be gambled with in the market, whereas that of the shareholder in the corporation may be and commonly is.

IV.

Collective ownership is not the ultimate, fundamental condition of Socialism. It is proposed only as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. And that end, to the attainment of which collective ownership is the means, is the fundamental condition of Socialism. The central idea of modern Socialism, its spirit, is the doctrine of the division of society into antagonistic classes. The producers of wealth are exploited by a class of capitalists draining from them a "surplus value," and, instinctively, they struggle against the exploitation, to reduce the amount of the surplus value taken by the capitalists to a minimum—ultimately to zero. To do away with that exploitation, to destroy the power of one class to live upon the labors of another class, is the Socialist aim. Social ownership and control are only proposed as means to the attainment of that end. If other means toward that end, quicker, more efficient or more certain means, can be found, there is nothing in Socialism to prevent their adoption.

It follows, therefore, that to make collective property of things not used to exploit labor does not, *necessarily*, form part of the Socialist programme. It is easy to see that, according to this principle of differentiation, it would be necessary to socialize the railroads, but not at all necessary to socialize a

wheelbarrow. It is not difficult to see that a woman might support herself through the possession of a sewing-machine who would otherwise be obliged to submit to exploitation as a factory worker. To secure her the ownership of the machine would, therefore, be no departure from Socialist principles. On the contrary, in her individual case, the aims of the Socialist would be realized in that she would be placed beyond the power of the exploiter of labor. Similarly, in the case of the farmer with a small farm, and of the craftsman with his own tools, or of groups of workers working co-operatively, there is no exploitation; no surplus value is extracted from their labor by any outside parties. Consequently, being neither exploited nor exploiters, their independent self-employment is quite consistent with Socialism.

As the Socialist movement has outgrown the influence of the early Utopians, which touched even Marx and Engels, it has given up the old notions of a regimentation of labor under the direction of the State. It is increasingly evident that the Socialists of to-day have abandoned the habit of speculating upon the practical application of their principles in future society. They are insisting more and more that Socialism be regarded as a principle—namely, the conscious elimination of the power of an idle class in society to exploit the wealth-producers. Whatever tends toward that end of eliminating the exploiter from society contributes to the fulfilment of the Socialist ideal.

Instead of the old contention that, in order to have Socialism, every petty industry must be destroyed by the power of great industrial corporations, and every small farm swallowed up by great bonanza farms of vast acreage, it is now recognized by most of the leading exponents of Socialism in this country and Europe that the small workshop and the small farm may enter very largely into the economic structure of the Socialist State. The small farm has thus far proved capable of more economical cultivation than farms of immense acreage; and it may be, as some authorities contend, that small workshops will prove quite as economical as, or even more economical than, great industries when the thousand hampering restrictions and discriminations and privileges which favor their greater rivals are removed.

Should this prove to be the case, there would be nothing to prevent a process of decentralization of industry taking place under Socialism; a process of decentralization so far-reaching

that private ownership and individual production would be much more diffused than now. The participation of the State in industry would be confined to the operation of railroads, mines and other great natural monopolies, and to the carrying on of the great fundamental public services which rest upon natural monopolies, leaving to individual enterprise and voluntary co-operation vastly more scope than these enjoy to-day in production and distribution. Needless to say, this is not a prophecy, but simply a statement of possibilities.

The important point to be remembered is that there is no principle of scientific Socialism which is opposed to the continuance of private property or private industrial enterprise, so that it involves no exploitation of the laborer by the non-laborer. It needs but the statement of this principle to demonstrate its truth. B is a farmer, working upon his own small farm. He exploits no man's labor, but manages to maintain himself and family in comfort. C is a shoemaker, owning his own little shop and his own tools. He, also, exploits no man's labor, but manages to support himself and his family comfortably. What reason could the State have for forbidding these men to employ themselves, denying them the right to exchange their products, shoes for farm produce, and compelling them to enter industrial or agricultural regiments as employees of the State?

Socialism, it cannot be too strongly emphasized, is not the fulfilment of a great plan of social organization, the principal feature of which is that the State owns and controls everything and aims to administer things with approximate equality of benefits and duties. It is an ideal, objectively considered, of a society in which there is no parasitic class preying upon the wealth-producers. Subjectively considered, it is a struggle on the part of the producers to throw off the exploiters, the parasites, in order that the ideal may be attained.

Of course, under Socialism, as in every civilized society, private property of all kinds would be subject to the ultimate rule of society. The interests of society as a whole, that is to say, would be regarded as superior to those of the individual. Subject to this superior social right, there is no reason why private property should not be far more wide-spread under Socialism than to-day. Take, for example, the matter of homes. The great mass of the

people do not own their own homes, though there can hardly be any question that the great mass of people desire to own homes of their own. It is conceivable that in a Socialist state of society every person who desired it could own a home for himself and family. On the other hand, it is not conceivable that the State would have any interest whatsoever in forbidding the ownership of homes. Since all families must have homes in which to live, whether provided by the State or otherwise, there could be no reason for the State's insisting upon being the universal landlord. Government ownership of dwellings in preference to the ownership of the dwellings of the many by a few extortioners, certainly: but there is no more reason, so far as the central principle of Socialism is concerned, for denying the right of a man to own his home than there is to deny him the right to own his hat.

V.

From the foregoing it will be seen that not only does Socialism not involve the abolition of all private property, but that, on the contrary, a wide extension of private property is quite compatible with Socialism as taught by Marx and his followers. It is not an insignificant thing that the Socialist party of the United States, in its national platform of 1904, charged that "Capitalism is the enemy and destroyer of essential private property." The Socialist protest against capitalism is that it destroys the economic independence of the producers. The restoration of that independence is the grand aim of all Socialist endeavor.

Failure to recognize with clearness the principle set forth in the foregoing pages produces inability to distinguish between Government ownership and Socialism. Many persons marvel that the Socialists do not hail with gladness, and join forces with, the various movements aiming at public ownership as they arise, and thus achieve Socialism piecemeal. Every proposal to extend the area of Government ownership and management is at once hailed as a "step toward Socialism." For example, a strong movement arises for the Government ownership of interstate railroads, or of the telegraph systems, and people wonder that the Socialists preserve their equanimity, stand aloof, apparently unconcerned, and decline to join the movement. Such persons confound—as many Socialists do—the external forms of the Socialist programme, its non-essentials, with its fundamental, essential prin-

ciple. They do not see that the form of ownership is relatively unimportant according to the Socialist philosophy.

It is quite as possible for a Government to exploit the workers in the interests of a privileged class as it is for private individuals, or quasi-private corporations, to do so. Germany with her state-owned railroads, or Austria-Hungary and Russia with their great Government monopolies, are not more Socialistic, but less so, than the United States where these things are owned by individuals or corporations. The United States is nearer Socialism for the reason that its political institutions have developed farther toward pure democracy than those of the other countries named. True, in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and other countries of the Old World, there is a good deal of Government ownership, but the Governments are class Governments and the workers are exploited for the benefit of the ruling classes. Obviously, the workers are no better off as a result of changing the channel of exploitation merely, while the amount of exploitation is left unchanged. The real *motif* of Socialism is not merely to change the form of industrial organization and ownership, but to eliminate exploitation.

To sum up: the whole matter may be very briefly expressed in the form of a declaration of principles, as follows: Socialism is not hostile to private property, except where such property is used to exploit the labor of others than its owners. The socialization of property in the Socialist State would be confined to (1) such things as in their nature could not be held by private owners without subjecting the community to exploitation or humiliation; (2) such things as the citizens might agree to own in common to attain superior efficiency in their management.

VI

Granted the foregoing conclusions, it is evident that the fear of a huge bureaucratic Government as an inevitable condition of Socialism loses its force. Such a bureaucracy might be created, it is true; but it would not result inevitably from the amount of administrative work involved in the management of all property and "all the means of production, distribution and exchange." In fact, there is no good reason for disbelieving the claim made by modern Socialists that the amount of Government control over the individual would be far less than we are now accustomed to.

In this connection it must be remembered that the regulation of capitalistic property in modern society, especially in the great social services—such as the railroads, lighting companies and the like—involves an enormous amount of government which, under such a condition as that suggested as belonging to Socialism, would be wholly superfluous. When one thinks of the tremendous amount of legislative and administrative effort which experience, not theorizing, has shown to be requisite for the restraint of capitalist enterprise, the mind is staggered by the stupendous total. No one knows, for it has never been computed, how much it has cost the United States during the last ten years to “regulate” the railroads in their relations to the public. This much we do know—that it has been found necessary to enact an immense body of legislation for the regulation of capitalistic enterprise. To enact this legislation has cost an enormous sum of money: to enforce it has cost a great deal more in the way of maintaining an army of inspectors, judges and officials of one sort and another.

It has been said in criticism of the methods of conducting our public services that the amount actually spent in doing the work is in many cases only a fraction of the total cost. To illustrate: the actual operation of a street railway, including the men who make the cars and lay the tracks, the men in the power-house, motormen and conductors, is said to represent less labor than what may be called the bookkeeping of the railway—the army of “spotters,” inspectors, collectors, cashiers, clerks, bookkeepers, accountants and the like. Most of these workers are in reality parasites; their labor is only rendered necessary by the preying of private interests upon the body social.

Similarly, it may be said that much of our Government is in a like manner parasitic, rendered necessary only by the preying of private interests upon the body social. The socialization of all the natural monopolies and the restoration of economic independence to the great mass of the people would render obsolete an astonishingly large body of laws, many of them irritating and humiliating to a degree that is oppressive, and would turn a large army of workers from parasitic to genuinely useful occupations.

Every abuse of capitalism calls forth a fresh instalment of legislation restrictive of personal liberty, with an army of prying officials. Legislators keep busy making laws, judges keep busy

interpreting and enforcing them, and a swarm of petty officials are kept busy attending to this intricate machine of popular government. In sober truth, it must be said that capitalism has created, and could not exist without, the very bureaucracy it charges Socialism with attempting to foist upon the nation.

There is, then, nothing in Socialism itself to warrant the assumption that it would enthrall the individual to the yoke of a bureaucratic government. There is no reason for regarding as impossible and absurd the assumption that, under a Socialist régime, the bounds of personal liberty would be greatly extended and the scope of government greatly narrowed. Whatever views one may entertain concerning Socialism, either as an ideal or as a movement, it is necessary and just to weigh seriously the claim, made in the national platform of the Socialist party for the year 1904, that it is "the only political movement standing for the programme and principles by which the liberty of the individual may become a fact." And, further, that "it comes to rescue the people from the fast-increasing and successful assault of capitalism upon the liberty of the individual." That claim cannot be waved aside by mere rhetoric, nor silenced by abuse. The fact remains that Socialism menaces neither private property nor personal liberty. There is nothing inconsistent with Socialism in the idea that Government interference with the individual should be as little as possible.

It will be said, doubtless, that the principles and the programme here sketched are those of Individualism rather than of Socialism as commonly understood. Granted that they satisfy the man who calls himself an Individualist, they are not therefore anti-Socialist. Socialism is not the antithesis of Individualism—except Individualism of the "Devil-take-the-hindmost," *laissez faire*, school. To that crude form of individualism, so-called, which accepts the doctrine that "Might is Right," under which the assertion of one man's might destroys the individual liberty of others, Socialists are opposed, just as the enlightened Individualist must be opposed. To the Individualism that is based upon equality of opportunity, the absence of privilege and the destruction of all artificial inequalities, so that Nature's inequalities alone manifest themselves, Socialism is not opposed. Indeed, Socialism comes as the fulfilment of that ideal.

Ninety-nine out of every hundred persons discussing this sub-

ject not only regard Socialism as the antithesis of Individualism, without any qualification whatsoever, but they make the far more serious blunder of regarding the present social system—if, indeed, one may use the word “system” to connote our industrial anarchy!—as a system of Individualism. Nothing could be more fallacious than this. The Individualism of the Fathers of the Republic, particularly of Jefferson and Samuel Adams, bears no relation to our present system with its ramifications of privilege. Free competition between man and man belongs to the concept of Individualism, but not so the competition, so-called, which takes place between the corporation and the individual. To make an artificial person, for legal purposes, of a great corporation such as the Standard Oil Company, and then to regard a struggle between it and an individual refiner or dealer as “free competition,” is to do violence to language and reason.

Illustrative of the confusion of thought upon this subject which pervades all ranks of society, we have the declaration of the Ohio Republican Convention, in asserting the claims of Mr. Taft to be the successor of President Roosevelt, that the issue in American politics in the year 1908 is “Individualism against Socialism”—the Republican party and Mr. Taft representing Individualism! Could anything be more grotesque than the application of the word Individualism to the Rooseveltian policies? Could the word be more abused than by its application to the Republican party programme? If Socialism represents one side of the issue fought out in our national politics last year, the other side is not Individualism, but Capitalism with its privileges, its invasions of personal liberty, its artificial inequalities and its economic servitude of class to class.

The Socialist ideal may be vain and chimerical, but no thinking person can deny that the influence of the ideal upon masses of our citizens is a wholesome one. The political Socialist movement may spend itself blazing trails for others to follow, opening a way to a promised land it may not enter; but the world will be the better for its existence. Fanaticism, in the name of Socialism, and under its banners, may seek to do away with private property and personal liberty; but that will be a caricature of the Socialism for which so many millions of earnest men and women in all lands are living lives of consecrated sacrifice.

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